Rebuilding the first year experience, one block at a time: A Practice Report

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Feature Practice Report

Rebuilding the first year experience, one block at a time

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Abstract

For many years, universities around the world have been developing and enhancing the First Year Experience (FYE), with a view to improving retention, performance and student satisfaction. This feature practice report outlines a strategic initiative, launched in 2018 at Victoria University in Melbourne, Australia that aims to transform the experience of Victoria University's first-year students on an unprecedented scale. This unique model reconceptualises the design, structure and delivery of first year units of study in order to deliver a program that deliberately focuses on students' pedagogical, transition and work/life balance needs. This initiative required the disruption and redevelopment of all university systems to ensure students experience a supportive and seamless transition into, and journey through, their first year of study at university.

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Background

Victoria University (VU) is a multi-campus institution with its main campus located in the western suburbs of Melbourne, Australia, the state capital of Victoria. A key aim of VU is to ensure the highest levels of student satisfaction, as measured by the Australian Quality Indicators of Teaching and Learning (QILT) Student Experience Survey (SES), among first-year students of any university in Victoria by 2020. This is a lofty aspiration and in seeking to achieve this, VU undertook a comprehensive review of how it engaged first-year students. In response to this feedback, as well as institutional and sector drivers, VU introduced a radical Australia-first learning and teaching model in 2018. This paper details the redesign of the first year at VU, including the reasons necessitating a change of this scale, the complex and multifaceted change process required to bring about this change in an established dual-sector university, and the principles and characteristics of the model. The desired outcome of this change was to improve student satisfaction, enable students to better transition into higher education and, succeed in their first year of study leading to an increased rate of progression into second year.

The changing role of the university

There have been considerable and constant forces impacting the definition and role of the university in contemporary society (see for example discussions in Barnett & Peters, 2018 and for an Australian perspective see Coaldrake & Stedman, 2013 and Marginson, 2016) These include the emergence of digital and mobile technologies which have enabled access, sharing and production of knowledge at any time and any place. The nature and characteristics of the student body are also evolving with people needing to study across their working life to maintain career currency and consequently demanding flexible study options suitable for their life circumstances. The traditional broadcast model of higher education (Tapscott, 2016) employed by universities worldwide, including VU, has remained fundamentally unchanged for more than a century. Under this regime, universities govern students' access to the educational environment via timetables of lectures, tutorials, seminars and semesters which suit the institutions' operational needs rather than those of students. The authors contend that while there have been numerous developments in the application of technology-enhanced learning, and undoubted progress has been made in terms of teaching practice, reforms have tended to stop at the classroom door, leaving the university unchanged and unchallenged. Other industries which traditionally operated under broadcast models, such as the entertainment, news media and retail sectors, have been forced to restructure in order to cater for customers no longer willing to follow what they see as arbitrary restrictive timetables, hence the rise of user-demand driven business models such as: streaming entertainment, the 24-hour news cycle, and online retail. VU's Block Model recognises and embraces this radical disruption via an intentional, whole of institution change that replaces the broadcast model with one that embeds students' educational and operational needs at the centre of not only the classroom but the entire university.

Higher education has dabbled with user-demand models via MOOCs and online courses however such dabbling has tended to be limited in scope and applicability and has not really changed the underlying business model. The vast majority of undergraduate students are still required to adhere to an on-campus timetable and teaching model which takes no account of what satisfies them as students, workers, carers and/or consumers.

VU has endeavoured to disrupt the traditional approach and generate a higher level of satisfaction by introducing a new hybrid model of course design and student engagement

known as The *VU First Year Model*, or alternatively the *VU Block Model*. This innovative approach is flexible, immersive, inclusive and is designed specifically to provide excellent educational outcomes such as employability, retention and completion for the 21st century student. The model simplifies and streamlines the student experience by allowing them to focus on one unit of study at a time. Units are run consecutively over four, four-week blocks across a 16-week semester rather than concurrently across a 12-week semester and four-week exam period. Students cover all learning activities and assessment in that four-week block before moving onto the next unit, knowing their results from the previous one. This model avoids the need for students who may be juggling the multiplicity of competing demands, deadlines, availabilities and relationships that currently complicate the traditional four units at once semester. Further, a simple timetable consolidates all classes into three regular periods of three to five hours, on three days each week, allowing students to manage their study, with work and other responsibilities.

The context of VU

The present initiative positions VU as offering a uniquely different higher education experience in the context of 40 Australian universities. Tracing its roots to the Footscray Technical School which began in 1916, VU has been described as the university of Melbourne's western suburbs, and VU's vision statement describes the institution as, "the university of opportunity and success" (Victoria University, 2017a).

These previous institutional titles reflect the history and purpose of VU, and the make-up of the student body. In 2017, VU had nearly 27,000 students, or just over 19,000 equivalent full-time enrolments (Victoria University, 2018). According to the Department of Education and Training (2017), VU has the highest proportion of students from a non-english speaking background and the second-highest proportion of low socioeconomic students of all universities in Victoria.

In Australia, VU is known as a dual-sector institution, meaning it offers both vocational education and training as well as higher education programs, which span all 10 levels of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF)[1]. This breadth means that VU students are able to articulate from an AQF level 1 certificate, to a level 10 doctoral level degree while remaining in the same institution. Institutional retention is therefore critical for VU where internal pathways are an integral part of its education operations.

In 2017, VU was placed within the top 2% of universities globally (Victoria University, 2018), with its position in the Times Higher Education league table improving from the 351-400 band ranked universities to the 301-350 band.

The drivers of change

A complex array of factors, which have included student enrolments at VU not keeping pace with the expanding Victorian higher education sector, a reduction in state funding for Training and Further Education (TAFE), high attrition rates and low quality educational ratings, have all been factors contributing to the introduction of the new model at VU.

Financial sustainability

In 2012, in response to the Australian Review of Higher Education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008) the Australian Government lifted the caps on funding for most undergraduate university places and the resulting demand-

[1] Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) https://www.aqf.edu.au/

driven system allowed institutions to determine how many students they would enrol, with government funding being linked to enrolment numbers. In Victoria, demand-driven enrolments resulted in an expansion of some of the largest and more highly ranked universities, and little or no growth for others. For example, Figure 1 details the growth in the Victorian higher education sector, which shows that despite sector growth in the state, certain universities did not grow in student numbers, including VU. Subsequently, in 2018 the Victorian Auditor-General's analysis of university financial sustainability, including higher education and TAFE, concluded that some universities, including VU, would have a challenge remaining financially viable (Victoria Auditor-General's Office, 2018).

High attrition

Overall rates of student attrition have remained stable in Australian higher education. Despite growing recognition of the complexity surrounding the issue from institutions and government, and extensive scholarly work on the topic, including the development of frameworks such as Sally Kift's Transition Pedagogy (2009), and the role of non-cognitive factors including student engagement (Trowler, 2010), the national attrition rate of around 15% has changed very little since 2005 (Department of Education and Training, 2016). Arguably, this may indicate some degree of improvement, given the 'massification' of the sector, i.e. the increased participation from larger numbers, including non-traditional students, since 2012, which has not resulted in increased national attrition rates.

Nonetheless, attrition remains a serious and persistent problem. Successive government reviews identified major drivers of attrition as the learning environment, teaching capability, lack of student engagement, high student/staff ratios, lack of student support and student personal factors such as "financial, emotional,

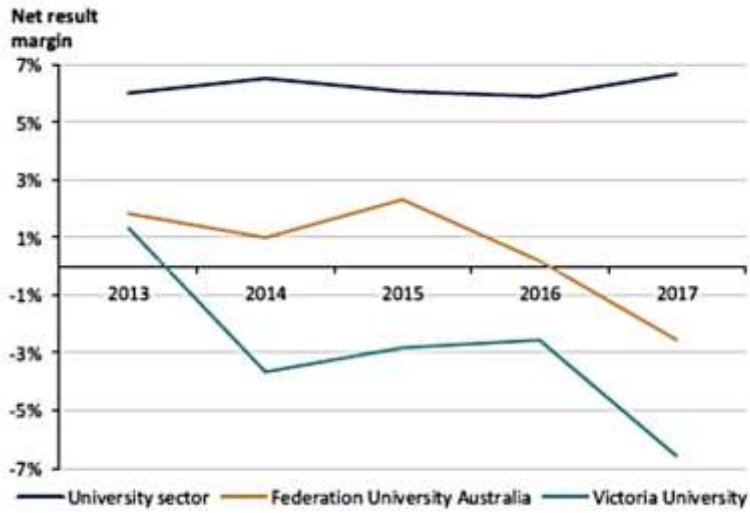

Figure 1. **Victorian Auditor-General analysis of financial performance of universities in Victoria**

health or other life events" (Department of Education and Training, 2018, p. 5).

The latest findings from the longest-running and most comprehensive study of the first-year university student experience in Australia were published in 2015 (Baik, Naylor & Arkoudis, 2015). This report provided unique insight into the changing experiences of university entrants. Some positive trends were present, with increases in clarity of purpose for going to university, reduction in intention to leave, clearer continuity from school to university, and increases in perceptions of some aspects of teaching quality and overall course satisfaction. Yet, other markers, such as social interaction at university declined, as did classroom engagement. These declines are concerning when considered alongside the increasing importance of 21st century skills, which have a very strong emphasis on social engagement, including in collaborative work (Griffin & Care, 2014). A subsequent study utilising a subset of items from the longitudinal panel study revealed that students at-risk of attrition had significantly lower perceptions of belonging, being supported, and intellectually engaged at university, and that this group had significantly higher study-related stress (Naylor, Baik & Arkoudis, 2018).

The Australian Department of Education and Training (2017) most recently reported attrition for 2016, which indicates VU had a rate of 21.41%, compared to the national total of 14.32%. As the university of 'opportunity and success', VU has an institutional strategy to combat attrition, investing in monitoring and early intervention, as do other Australian universities. However, VU wanted to do more to address this issue and to ensure student success, so they developed a design-based curriculum model that targets known transition challenges.

Low educational quality ratings

Another challenge at VU are relatively poor outcomes in measures of educational quality, with VU performing poorly on national surveys relative to other institutions. In the 2017 QILT SES VU has the lowest overall score for student satisfaction in Australia at 72.6%, considerably lower than the national average of 78.5% (QILT, 2017). VU performed significantly below the national average on teaching quality, student support and learning resources, but equal to the national average (with overlapping 90% confidence intervals), in skills development and learner engagement, Together, these indicators support a need to strive for higher quality, and while VU has an extensive range of processes designed to support continual quality improvement, a radical change was determined as necessary.

Exploration of a new first year model

As a result of these challenges, VU leadership determined a radical change was needed. In early 2017, VU held a series of meetings with its staff to canvas ideas on how to enhance the first year experience of VU students in order to reduce attrition and increase student satisfaction. Much of the discussion and feedback echoed the numerous initiatives and principles implemented across the Australian higher education sector over recent years (Kift, 2009; Krause, 2005; Nelson, Creagh, Kift & Clarke, 2014) rather than seeking to find new, and perhaps more VU-relevant, solutions.

Specifically, Kift's Transition Pedagogy (2009) put forward six curriculum design principles to help institutions explicate initiatives to support student transition into university. These principles, and corresponding institutional initiatives, focus on the many transitional changes occurring during early university study. This focus includes diversity of student cohorts, the importance of student engagement,

and institutional processes that can play a part in smoothing the transition, such as educational design, strategy and policy, and quality assurance. The findings of the recent review of attrition in Australian higher education mirrored much of the Transition Pedagogy literature stating, "as a result of the new economy, digitalisation and complex factors leading to attrition, institutions should be continually adjusting curriculum, pedagogy and academic policy design to meet student needs and expectations" (Department of Education and Training, 2018, p. 6). These recommendations included institutions forming and evaluating a comprehensive retention strategy which should, among other activities, take account of support services.

However, many of the recommendations in first year Transition Pedagogy were already in place at VU and many of the principles and initiatives were already embedded in its organisational practices and ways of operating. A comprehensive retention policy was also in place in 2017, which included procedures for triaging at-risk students, promoting use of support services, and supporting decisions about enrolment.

Internal discussions within VU called for a solution that moved beyond, or arguably, more wholeheartedly adopted, the frameworks and principles of first year transitions. What was required was an approach that, while incorporating these initiatives, would also position the university as legitimately agile, innovative, open and ready to deliver an educational experience suited to the 21st century student. VU developed an internal White Paper (2017a), which explored how VU could radically change first year student outcomes. As indicated by the excerpt below, the document reflected the expectations around the implementation of the Block Model and also importantly gave insight into the key outcomes desired by VU:

> Victoria University's **First Year Model**, an Australian first, will be introduced in 2018 by the new *First Year College*. Instead of insisting students engage with four units of study concurrently, the *First Year College* will offer students the ability to study their chosen degree course in *sequential blocks*; completing one unit and its assessment at a time, over three to four weeks, before moving to the next. Students will be able to focus on a single subject in depth rather than juggling multiple units with competing demands and deadlines; immerse themselves in each unit, learning through discussion and group interaction; form strong and lasting peer connections formed through close contact with one group at a time; get to know and be known by their educators; receive timely and targeted support; and, crucially, they can achieve success early to build confidence and motivation. The *block model* is ideally suited to ensuring a sense of belonging, learner sophistication and the other known predictors of learning gain. (p.7)

Fung (2017a) suggests that the higher education sector should take a step back and "ask some fundamental, values-based questions about what a university is, and about what kinds of educational developments they want to prioritise, within and across disciplines, in the years ahead" (p. 144). Such questions were considered by VU in unpacking the need for change in how we engage our students in their courses of study. Key to this discussion was the idea that genuine reform could not be limited to classroom delivery nor academic practice, but rather had to involve all the institutional systems that support the student experience. But how? The mode of delivery was identified as a central feature that could motivate change across many aspects of the VU's educational policy and practice.

Alternative delivery modes

Contemporary universities have been increasingly trialling and implementing alternative delivery modes to the traditional

multi-unit semester. Dating back to at least the 1960s, there is a small but informative body of literature exploring intensive higher education units. Researchers have noted the expansion of what are variously termed intensives, summer or winter schools, time shortened, compressed, accelerated or block modes in the delivery of higher education (see Davies 2006 for a review of earlier literature). The delivery mode has partly increased to provide greater student flexibility, allowing students to complete their course faster by foregoing what would otherwise be a semester break, and also attend classes on weekends or nights, outside of professional commitments.

A recent survey gives some insight into the prevalence and characteristics of intensive delivery models in Australian higher education. Male et al. (2016) surveyed 105 course co-ordinators across 26 Australian institutions and found that 52% of intensive units were taught at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The most common reasons for their introduction were to allow students to accommodate study with outside activities (30%), to promote engagement with interactive learning (25%), to allow students to focus on one unit at a time (10%), and to mitigate geographic distance challenges for staff and students (9%). Although the number or prevalence of the cases for each model was not reported, the study reported that intensive models included:

- two full days of classes following online preparation
- one full-time week of classes
- two, three or four moderately intensive weeks of classes
- a full day of classes once a week for seven weeks
- five half days over a full semester

Scholarly literature on intensives includes several comparative studies of particular units with a focus on using matched samples to test educational aspects, satisfaction or outcomes of intensive versus traditional delivery model (see, for example, Eames & Luttman, 2018; Kucsera & Zimmano, 2010; Smith et al., 2016). These studies generally aim to establish the rigor or efficacy of intensive mode units, in order to address concerns about possible impacts on quality (see Daniels, 2000 for a review). There are also some rarer examples of very large-scale comparative studies, generally in single disciplines or institutions (Austin & Gustafson 2006; Lutes & Davies, 2013, 2018). Lutes and Davies (2013; 2018), in particular, comprise analyses of very large datasets, described in more detail below. In addition to comparative studies, there are also studies exploring teachers' perspectives (Kuiper, Solomonides & Hardy, 2015), students' perspectives (Scott, 2003), and pedagogical and design elements (Male et al., 2017; Marques, 2012; Wlodkowski, 2003) including very recently developed best-practice guides for intensive education in Australia (Male et al., 2016).

Nevertheless, delivery mode does not, by itself, appear to be a predictor of improved student satisfaction or enhanced learning outcomes. Both traditional and intensive delivery modes can provide excellent or poor educational outcomes, depending on other factors such as instructor characteristics, teaching approach, classroom environment, and curriculum and learning design.

Davies (2006) found that across 17 comparative studies from 1960 onwards, 12 reported no significant difference between traditional and intensive mode delivery on student learning outcomes; one study reported poorer and four studies reported superior results for the intensives. However, study design was lacking in many, with no attempt to control for differing baseline characteristics of students choosing, or not choosing, to undertake intensives. Some

later comparative studies did control for baseline student characteristics and found intensives to be associated with significantly higher satisfaction and grades (Kucsera & Zimmaro, 2010).

A very large-scale study of student workload in intensives, including institutional data from 29,000 students at Brigham Young University (Lutes & Davies, 2013; 2018) concluded that out-of-class workload was significantly lower in intensive courses, and that higher teacher autonomy in designing assessments had an effect on both out-of-class work and how much value students assigned to their work in intensive units (Wlodkowski, 2003). Importantly, the authors' coding of the syllabi across traditional and intensive units showed very little difference, suggesting similar content breadth. In the same study, teachers (n=39) reported advantages of memory recall in intensives, but that deep learning suffered and that effectiveness varied across disciplines, with longer content disciplines generally not being as well suited to intensives.

These findings highlight that delivery mode is only one factor, and it is necessary to consider other features of the curriculum. To highlight this point, Smith et al (2016), provide reasons why intensive learning may be superior in engineering, including incorporating service learning, visiting speakers and site visits; while other studies describe them as enabling more 'real-world' learning (Kucsera & Zimmaro, 2010). Some features are clearly enabled by intensive delivery mode, such as flexible class scheduling, which potentially increases staff-student interactions, peer-to-peer interaction, and time spent undertaking interactive learning.

Research investigating teacher and student perceptions, as well as pedagogical and design principles, highlight features that are important in an intensive-mode curriculum. A small sample of Australian teachers with a successful track record of delivering intensives reported the units worked best when they were flexibly structured to meet student needs, fitted with the students life context, encouraged commitment and engagement early, made expectations clear, scaffolded and sequenced assessment, were blended and made use of interactive online tools, and where teachers were available to students almost all of the time (Kuiper, Solomonides & Hardy, 2015).

In the Male et al. (2016) study which produced a good practice guide, the benefits of the intensive model included a strong learning community, increased immersion and interaction, continuity of learning, 'real-world' learning, and increased teacher-student communication. Students reported they enjoyed the bonding and learning with peers, the focus on a single unit, interactivity, continuity between learning, application and practice, and authenticity and hands-on activities. Risks were identified as exhaustion, failure of students to adequately prepare, and lack of timely feedback.

In describing the dynamics of intensive learning, Marques (2012) stresses the paradigm shift that is necessary by teachers and administrators of intensive courses. This requires an intentional preparation and consideration in the design of intensives, including supporting high levels of pre-class preparation by students, encouraging and supporting student self-regulation, and timely feedback cycles and monitoring to help those students in need to extra assistance.

The Block Model

While intensive units (subjects) are generally only available at certain points of a course, or to certain sub-cohorts, usually postgraduate, a more radical course delivery model is 'the block'. The block does away with units being taught in parallel, and instead delivers courses in sequential units. During VU's extensive and

heuristic exploration into contemporary university reform, we were continually drawn to a TedX Vancouver talk by Professor David Helfand (2013) on *Designing a University for the New Millennium*. Helfand spoke to the heart of what we were seeking to achieve. Helfand suggested that the traditional approach to higher education was ineffective and that a radical, student focused, whole of institution reform, in this case in the shape of the Block Model, was necessary to rectify this situation. We tested the idea with a number of current VU students and the response was overwhelmingly positive.

This prompted us to explore the Block Model further. A study trip was organised to Colorado College in the United States and Quest University in Canada, as both institutions offer the Block Model. The study group was impressed by the positive way students at both institutions reflected on their learning experience in the Block Model. What was also striking was the way many academic and professional staff understood that radical shifts and changes to the traditional idea of university operations had to be made and embraced in order to make such a student-focused approach work. The study group returned to Melbourne knowing that if VU were to adopt the Block Model then a similar, institution wide, change in mindset would be required.

We wrangled with the decision on whether to undertake it as a small pilot program or roll it out to all of the first year cohort. The latter, whilst risky, was simpler and meant that we could maintain just two systems (first year and others) rather than three systems (first year block, first year traditional, and all others). VU made a strategic decision to invest in the two-system approach. Fung (2017a) argues that we can only ascertain what good education looks like by analysing all elements of the educational ecosystem.

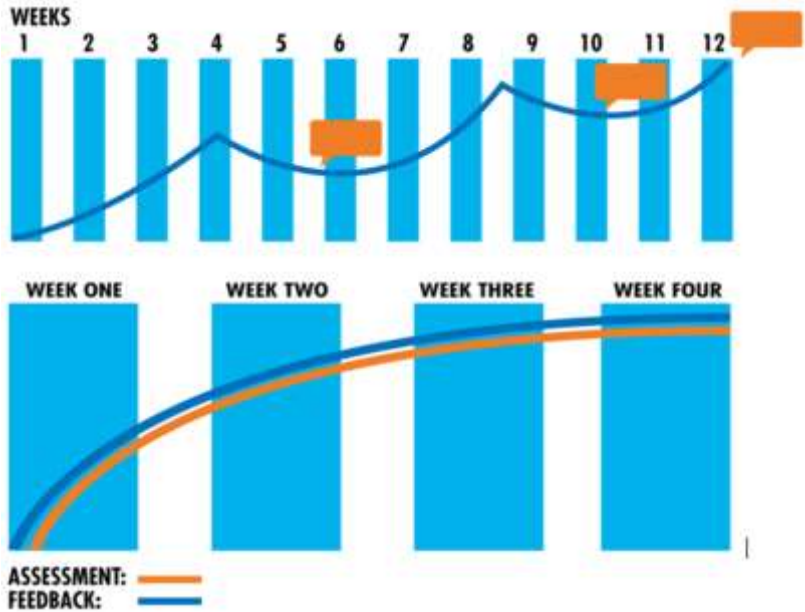

***Figure 2*. Traditional 12-week versus block mode in assessment and feedback**

We enlisted the support of operational leaders from all university systems to do this and so the journey began.

The VU Block Model

The VU Block Model, compared with the traditional semester-based predecessor, are graphically presented in Figure 2 on the previous page. These figures demonstrate the changed temporal patterns in learning progression and assessment.

Although a block model is new to mainstream Australian higher education, similar models of teaching and learning exist elsewhere, and have proven to be successful, producing increased levels of student satisfaction in educational institutes in Canada, the United States and Scandinavia. President and Vice Chancellor of Quest University in Canada Dr George Iwama, a pioneer of the block teaching format who recently helped launch this innovative model at VU, claims that, "The Block Model opens student minds and honours learning passion … students learn to construct knowledge rather than have it transferred to them" (Victoria University, 2017b, para. 5).

The principles underpinning the VU Block Model are described below.

Design principles

Every block unit will be designed for a blended learning environment. In addition to exceeding VU's minimum online standards every block will:

1 Have clear beginning and endings (immersive & self-contained)

- Ensure learning outcomes are achievable in the four-week timeframe
- Employ a variety of assessment tasks to demonstrate learning outcomes
- Design assessment to be completed within the unit schedule and all feedback returned before commencement of next block
    a. Include clear assessment rubrics
    b. Provide opportunities for early student success
- Focus on knowledge exploration and application rather than content transmission
- Include opportunities for peer feedback and collaboration
- Use explicit and differentiated learning opportunities (more than one way to achieve the same learning outcome)
- Optimise opportunities to learn in new ways within the parameters of four-week block

Delivery principles

The design and development principles will be realised in delivery as each unit will:

1 Be student-centered, active and engaging (you are the university, 'be fabulous')

- Outline the relevance of unit to course and career
- Provide early and ongoing feedback
- Evaluate students' interests and individual needs/expectations
- Include opportunities for self-assessment that leads to personalised and adaptive learning
- Incorporate the use of digital technology
- Integrate active and authentic learning practices in all units

Applicability to VU model

In designing the principles and design processes that underpin the development and rollout of the VU Block Model, the institution took an evidence-based approach, drawing on the research findings that had potential relevance. However, caution was exercised in generalising most to the VU Block Model. Strictly speaking, there were very few examples of models like VU's in the literature.

Organisational change needed to introduce the new model

VU embraced the institutional systemic challenges necessary to implement the Block Model. Two 12-week semesters plus a four-week exam period have now transformed into eight four-week semesters. To-date this has required significant changes to established procedures and systems. A change of this scale and complexity, delivered in such a short timeframe, is unprecedented in Australian higher education. The next section details some of the change that was necessary, and how it was achieved.

Organisational change project

An internal project steering group was formed and each system/service head including enrolments, student support, marketing, quality and planning, people and culture, IT and connected learning was represented on the group. The project adopted an agile project management methodology which focussed on collaborative, iterative design and development with rigorous communication protocols. This group met twice weekly to report, seek support, celebrate successes and highlight challenges. Each system/service operational area also implemented a similar program of work to ensure project recommendations were tested and implemented in a timely way. A connected externally-focused project group worked on issues relating to professional accreditation, industry engagement, and regulatory issues. The organisational change framework at VU broadly acknowledges that education is the product of a complex interplay of systems, similar to the complexity in ecological definitions of the university (Barnett & Peters, 2018).

The traditional institutional processes of sending out offers, enrolment periods, timetabling, reporting etc. have had to be recast. To facilitate this, staff across the university have had to collaborate, share intelligence and synchronise their activity and planning. All project activity has been tracked, curated and reported using a SharePoint platform with strict deliverables and risk framework considerations. Figure 3 graphically presents the complex interplay of university departments and functions that were central to the change required in introducing the Block Model.

Staffing and structure

The vision could not be achieved within the confines of the existing college and organisational structures so a new entity called the *First Year College* (FYC) was established with a brief to recruit 'teaching-passionate' academic staff, interested in supporting the development and implementation of a new First Year Student Experience at VU. This was anticipated to be a daunting challenge, however, the response was phenomenal and extremely competitive. The FYC was intentionally designed to promote connection, collaboration and creativity across disciplinary boundaries. Staff were co-located on one floor and office space was randomly allocated with no disciplinary groupings. This has enabled positive interdisciplinary interactions and sharing of ideas.

Figure 3. **An ecological approach to organisational change at VU**

Curriculum design teams

Between the decision to proceed and the formation of the FYC, VU's Teaching and Learning Connected Learning team was pivotal in coordinating an innovative curriculum design framework and cross-institutional teams worked on unit design and development that enshrined the student experience firmly and positively as its central focus. An organisational construct of six cross-organisational and cross-disciplinary clusters was formed with each cluster consisting of staff from the Library, Educational Development, Academic Skills Development, Technology Enhanced Learning Design and a range of academic content experts. Academic staff signed up to cluster groups to develop subjects where they had discipline expertise and teaching experience. The expertise of their non-academic, cluster colleagues became part of the fabric of the unit as it was developed. A rigorous peer review of the unit was completed prior to formal completion of the redesign activities.

Design process

Redesigning traditional 12-week semesters into four-week blocks required VU to reconceptualise how curriculum was created. Design teams employed a 'Design Inquiry Learning' (DIL) approach which "combines an inquiry-based learning approach with a design-based scientific paradigm" (Mor & Mogilevsky, 2013. p.2). This approach resulted in rich integration of techno-pedagogical approaches to optimise student learning opportunities. A blended learning infrastructure incorporating adaptive and interactive resources supported a flipped and action-based learning paradigm. Space was made available to accommodate these activities but generally most teams met at 'The HIVE', VU's learning and teaching centre, which is an intentionally designed space to promote connection and collaboration. The details of this process will be described in another publication.

The classroom has also been recast. Studying one unit at a time means that there are no competing timetable requirements. There is no

need to be bound to classroom or the timetable of other units. Teachers are able to base their classes where they see fit: in an art gallery, a court room, in a workplace, or in the bush.

Desired outcomes

The desired outcomes of the Block Model at VU are systemic and involve different stakeholders. These include students, academic and professional staff, as well as VU as an organisation, and the wider community. Consistent with the VU White Paper (2017a), the Block Model aims to increase first year student satisfaction, engagement, retention and success. In terms of the institution's teaching and learning staff, the Block Model aims to introduce a different and student-focussed teaching approach, increased staff engagement, and to harness more effective learning design. Specifically, a sense of belonging from both staff and students was critical, and would be evidenced, in part, by increased participation in professional development and collegial events. Organisationally, the capability for dynamic change, that is, the ability to plan, undertake and successfully execute rapid change, was a key outcome.

The ultimate result of the Block Model was to increase student learning, especially for those students at-risk of attrition. Preliminary evidence of the success of the project is promising and includes increases in pass rates and average grades (see Figure 4), which has also been detailed in news media (Dawkins & Solomonides, 2018). Further evidence about the efficacy of the Block Model is still emerging and is not the focus of this paper. Future publications will explore the evidence of success of the block in more depth.

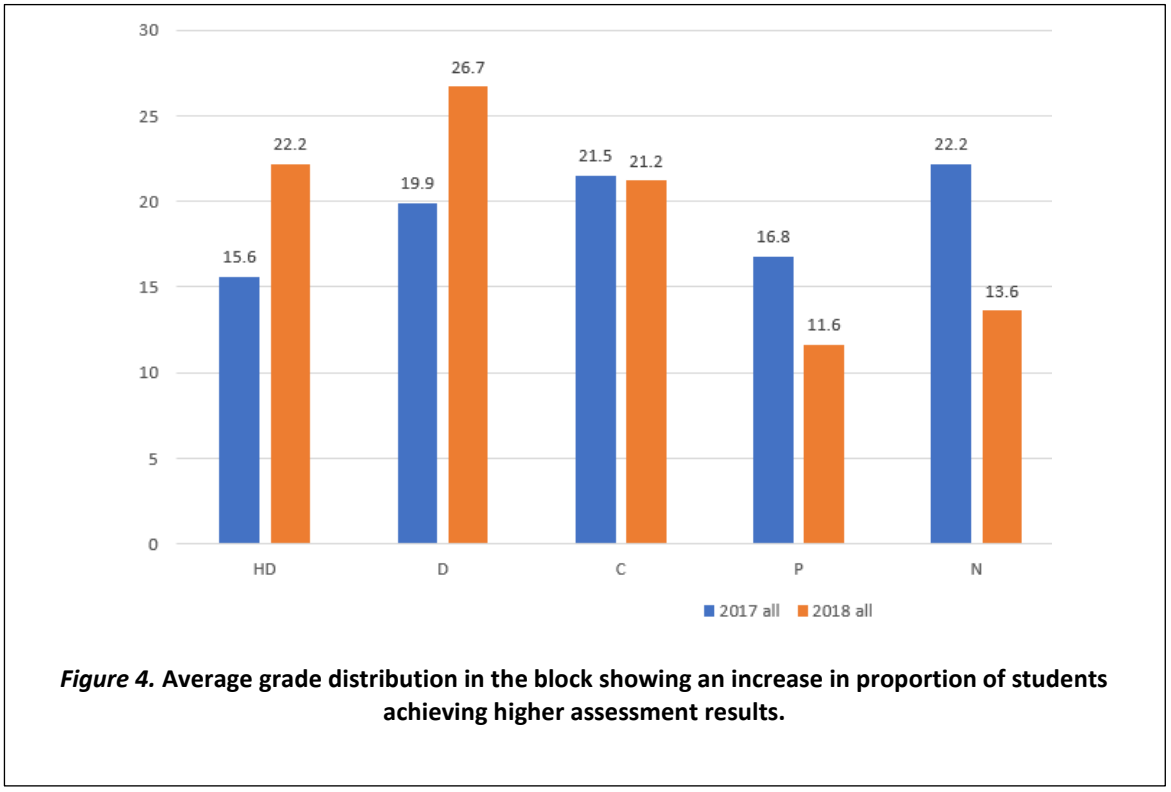

Figure 4. **Average grade distribution in the block showing an increase in proportion of students achieving higher assessment results.**

Conclusion

The VU First Year Model appears to have had a positive impact on student engagement, learning and outcomes as evidenced by the 2018 semester one results and student progress into the second semester. The Block Model recognises, respects and accommodates the complexity of student lives and facilitates a predictable, manageable and connected first year experience. We hope the VU Block Model will achieve Fung's (2017b) expectation of engaging students "not as passive recipients but as agents; not as predominantly inward-looking participants but as outward-looking critical investigators" (para. 9). By skilfully scaffolding Transition Pedagogy into the first year of university study, the VU Block Model is designed to provide students with the connections, cultural capital, capabilities and knowledge they require to become confident and independent learners and to work with, rather than ignore, the complexity of their lives. It is also hoped that the establishment of a more positive, connected and collaborative FYC staff culture and environment will enhance the appetite for sustainable techno-pedagogical innovation that will ultimately enhance student success. Perhaps Davies (2006) prediction that "intensive modes of teaching seem to be an idea whose time has come" will eventuate, albeit 12 years later (para. 6).

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